

Fifth Sunday in Lent ≅ Year A
Saint Paul's Episcopal Church
March 13, 2005

Love God and Do What You Will!

Lessons for the Day

- ✧ Ezekiel 37: 1-3 (4-10) 11-14
- ✧ Psalm 130
- ✧ Romans 6:16-23
- ✧ John 11: (1-16) 17-44

Homily

I greet you in the name of **God our Creator**, **Christ our Brother**, and the **Holy Spirit** who sustains us and empowers us to love and serve them both. Let us now collect ourselves in the presence of God, and wait on God's word for us today . . . (Pause)

Amen.

Here in this time and place, **we don't know much about slavery**. We've read the history books, of course. We know about mankind's long and sorry history of enslaving the "other" -- the tyranny of the powerful over the less-powerful, the dominance of the rich over the poor. But **we're not slave-holders**. And **we've never been slaves**. So we wouldn't say we know much about **true** slavery.

Or maybe we do.

Perhaps in our time and place **slavery appears wearing a very different face -- a face quite unlike the one it wore when the apostle Paul wrote today's lesson** in the Epistle to the Romans.

Think for a moment about your own life, and about the lives that you see lived-out all around you. **Without judging** -- but simply by observing and reflecting -- **ask yourself**:

- Do you **know anyone** who is **enslaved by his or her work**?
- Do you know anyone who is **a slave to possessions**?
- Do you know anyone who is **a slave to drink or drugs, to food or sex or to any of the other more-titillating enslavements**?
- Do you know anyone who is **a slave to what other people think** about them?
- Do you know anyone who is **a slave in other ways**?

Did you answer "yes" to any of these questions? Did the names of someone you know or of someone you love come to mind? Did your own name or face flash before you in response to one or more of the queries?

Perhaps we **know more about slavery** -- this slavery that leads to death --**than we ever thought we did**. More than we would ever dare to let on . . .

At the same time, we also **know very little about slavery in Saint Paul's time** -- about what the word "slave" would have meant to Paul's readers in Rome, or about how one became a slave in those days . . .

In the time in which Saint Paul was writing, there were three primary ways in which a person could become a slave:

1. One could be **captured** in war and **forcibly enslaved**,
2. One could **choose slavery to pay off a debt**, or
3. One could **choose slavery because of an inability to care for oneself** -- shifting the duty to provide life's necessities onto the master, in return for a pledge to work as a slave in the master's house or business.

Interestingly, two of the three ways in which people of the first century could become enslaved involved **choosing slavery**. Perhaps that's one of the reasons Paul uses slavery to illumine today's lesson.

The epistle to the Romans is **Paul's most carefully crafted statement of the Christian faith**. And in today's lesson, Paul is dealing with an important question -- one that is every-bit-as-relevant to us today as it was to Paul's readers in Rome almost two thousand years ago.

Here's the crux of the question:

"If Christ's death and resurrection have freed us from obedience to Jewish Law, can we do whatever we want, whenever we want, to (or with) whomever we want, with no consequences?"

If we are **no longer slaves to the Jewish Law, are we now free to be slaves to any random impulse** that flits through our consciousness? If we are not owned by the Law, **are we now owned by ourselves**? And if we are not owned by ourselves, then **who does own us**, and what do we owe them?

Can we -- in the now-famous words of Saint Augustine -- **"Love God and do what (we) will!"** Well **yes**, sort of. **And also no**, as well.

We are -- by God's grace in Christ Jesus -- **freed from the law**. We **can** now **choose a new master**. But we also **must choose a new master**. Let's see how that played out for those Paul was addressing in Rome.

Remember that Paul's letter to the **Romans** would have been **written to people who were already believers**. These early Christians would have been **baptized into the church as adults** -- and baptized only after a lengthy period of instruction and preparation. These people would have **chosen** Christianity and **chosen** baptism -- and both these choices could have been fraught with risk.

Paul reminds the Romans -- and these are my words but his thoughts -- that they have **chosen to submit themselves as slaves to Christ**. As **Christian believers, they have accepted a new master**. They have given up slavish (there's that word again) obedience to the Law and accepted Christ instead. They were **freed from the Law** and **freed for a new life of righteousness** in Christ.

Well good for them!

But what about us? Where do we fall on this whole master/slave thing? **What is our Law? How shall we live?**

We, too, are called to throw-in with the Christ. We are called -- just as these early Christians in Rome -- to be slaves to Jesus Christ.

In fact -- **as the priest says when making the sign of the cross** on the foreheads of the newly-baptized -- **we have** -- in Baptism -- **been "sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever."**

To borrow an image from the cowboy culture of the American southwest, we have been **branded with the cross of Christ**. For some of us, **this is a brand we chose** in adult baptism. For others of us, the **brand of Christ was chosen for us when we were baptized as infants**.

Either way, **we affirm our branding every time we participate in the Baptismal Covenant**. And the Baptismal Covenant speaks volumes about what it means to be **slaves to righteousness and to sanctification**. We vow -- among other things -- to:

"Persevere in resisting evil and, whenever (we) fall into sin to repent and return to the Lord."

"Proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ."

"Seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving (our) neighbor as ourselves," and to

"Strive for justice and peace among all people, (while respecting) the dignity of every human being."

BCP, pages 304, 305

In Christ we are freed from the Law -- for sure and forever. But **our freedom is a freedom for love, not a freedom for license**.

Our freedom is the freedom to choose -- as slaves in the first century did -- **who will be our master**. Will we give ourselves over to God and to a life that is consonant with God's love? Or will we choose something else, something less?

It's easy to hear Saint Augustine's remark as:

"Love God and do what you will."

It's much more appropriate to Augustine's original meaning to put the emphasis on the first two words:

"Love God and do what you will."

We must always remember that -- in our baptism -- we have been "sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever." **We belong to Christ. We are branded with the sign of the cross** -- the very brand of God. And that very brand marks each of us as one of God's own, calling us to keep the commitments made at our Baptism.

When we attend to those commitments, when we remember whose we are, then (and only then) are we free to -- at Augustine's bidding -- "Love God, and do what we will."

AMEN